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Monetization for a Free-to-Play Mobile Game

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<p>The purpose of the thesis is to make a practical improvement proposal for the company that commissioned this research.</p> <p>The improvement proposal gives suggestions on how the company's mobile game can be made better. The suggestions focus on how to help getting more revenue from the mobile game. The mobile game of the company is a free game for Android mobile devices (tablets and smartphones using Android Operating System; one example is Samsung Galaxy Tablet or Mobile Phone). Hence, the scope of the thesis is the intersection of 3 areas of knowledge.</p> <p>The first area is about how to make money from free digital products, or in other words, the business model of free digital products. To understand how money is made from free mobile games, it is necessary to understand how digital products in general have been given away for free and still yielded profit. The second area consists of particular models that were built by professionals in the game industry. Those models are useful in helping us understand why players play game, how to keep them coming back. And more important, those models when combined with models in the first area provide insights into the issue at hand. The third area of knowledge is acquired through primary research specifically revolved around the mobile game of the company. Qualitative research method is employed for the primary research: 2 interviews and one em-</p>	
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PREFACE

I would like to give my deepest gratitude and appreciation to my parents, for their unceasing support to me over the past 4 years. Without their love and support, I am not sure I could have done what I have done so far, and become the person I am today. Next I want to thank Ryan, my great mentor. You taught me humility; you taught me how to research. Without you, I am not sure I could have get through that terrible year of 2013 and be here today. I want to thank Ruey, my tutor teacher over the past 4 years. You are another great mentor that has taught me a great deal. I failed many times and got up with your help that many times. I want to thank Sami, my supervisor. You have been greatly helpful, guiding me through the thesis process. Without you, I wouldn't be able to finish this in such a time-constraint. Finally I would like to thank Veli-Pekka and Vlad at the company. Despite your heavy schedule at the company, you guys still did your best to help me with this thesis which I really appreciate.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Mobile game is an growing industry with huge base of consumers and enormous profit to be had. Mobile game industry, however, has its own way of selling and distributing its products. Most mobile games nowadays are given away for free and gaining profit by other indirect approaches. The company that commissioned this research is one of those companies who produce and distribute mobile game with that mindset.

The purpose of the thesis is to make a practical improvement proposal for the company that commissioned this research. The improvement proposal gives suggestions on how the company's mobile game can be made better. The suggestions focus on how to help getting more revenue from the mobile game. The mobile game of the company is a free game for Android mobile devices (tablets and smartphones using Android Operating System; one example is Samsung Galaxy Tablet or Mobile Phone). Hence, the scope of the thesis is the intersection of 3 areas of knowledge.

The first area of knowledge concerns how to make money from free digital products, or in other words, the business model of free digital products. To understand how money is made from free mobile games, it is necessary to understand how digital products in general have been given away for free and still yielded profit. The second area of knowledge consists of particular models that were built by professionals in the game industry. Those models are useful in helping us understand why players play game, how to keep them coming back. And more important, those models when combined with models in the first area provide insights into the issue at hand. The third area of knowledge is acquired through primary research specifically revolved around the mobile game of the company.

The thesis recaps and explains the fundamental ideas in the first two areas of knowledge. The findings from primary research is then presented and evaluated through the lens of those fundamental ideas. Based on that, an improvement proposal for the company is compiled with concrete suggestions backed with reasons on how to help the game generate more revenue.

The next chapter presents the first 2 areas of knowledge, providing the context of this research. It will help answer questions such as: Why are some products given away for free? Why so many digital products are free today? Or how money is made by pricing products at the cost of zero.

2 UNDERSTANDING HOW FREE PRODUCTS MAKE MONEY

This chapter discusses the theoretical background needed to gain a firm grasp on how money is made in business through giving products away for free. First the psychology is explained, we will find out how people respond to the idea of getting something for free. Next we will explore different business models of free with the focus on the business model of freemium.

2.1 Psychology of Free

When a product is offered at a price of zero, people feel no risk of making a bad decision. After all it doesn't cost a cent; it's free - as people would reason. They often forget the cost of time they invest in using or experiencing the product. Instead people are much more triggered by the idea of zero cost. In his paper 'Mental Transaction Cost', economist Nick Szabo (1999) introduces the concept of 'mental transaction' that may help explain this pattern of behavior.

Szabo argues that there is a kind of cost called 'mental transaction cost' that represents the effort a consumer takes in considering whether to buy a product. For example: comparing different products to find the better quality or better price, bargaining for a better price; those action incur mental transaction cost. When a product is given away for free, mental transaction cost drops dramatically. Consumers think less about the worth of the product, they are more tempted by the free factor quickly grab the product.

In fact, as Shirky (2003) humorously points out, the only transaction with no mental transaction cost is theft. According to him, products when given away for free evoke in people the irresistible temptation of getting something of value without any financial cost. Therefore, a

decent product when given away for free would likely gain a great number of consumers. This is an important point to keep in mind. It will help us understand why music, news, and mobile games are given away for free in later chapters.

2.2 Understand why business give products away for free

There is a common saying in business world “There is a nothing as a free lunch”. What people mean when saying it is that when you get something for free, it is often certain that something will be taken from you. Free has been for a long time in history viewed under suspicious eyes, and it is not an unfounded opinion. ‘Free’ can be traced back to seventeenth-century saloons in New Orleans, where lunch was offered for free, as long as you buy at least one drink. It turned out that often people would buy just only one drink but more than enough to cover the price of the lunch. (Anderson 2010).

In twentieth century, marketers utilized free as a sales gimmick in mass production era: giving away samples to consumers. Consumers experienced the product and decided whether to buy or not. From the start, free was a gimmick to induce people’s spending: giving them a product for free, free drink, free leaflet-recipe books, so that they would buy your products: food, the food ingredients.

Free became an embedded characteristic of publishing industry. Free increases circulation. Circulation enhances readership, large readership makes a magazine, radio show more attractive as a platform for other business to advertise products. Free information but sell the platform to other business to advertise their products

2.3 Exponential Growth of free products in digital age

One key in giving one's product away for free is to drive down the production cost close to zero. Most physical products are made not at a cost of zero. That's why most products in physical markets are not for free. It is different in digital markets. The production cost of digital products is dwindling at exponential rate. According to Anderson (2010) the rapid development in technology and the decreasing cost of computer processing power, digital storage technologies, bandwidth has driven down production cost of digital products.

On production cost structure of digital product, Seufer (2014) argues that digital product differs from physical product in the cost per unit of production. In the production of physical products, each unit requires a certain amount of materials, which in turn represents expense. However, digital products 'can be replicated for effectively no cost' (Seufer, 2014, 4). In other words, the cost of creating one copy of software and the cost of making 1000 copies of the same software are virtually the same.

Seufer (2014) remarks on distribution cost: 'often, the only costs associated with distributing a digital product are hosting expenses and platform fees. In aggregate, these costs can be substantial; at the marginal level, however, they are effectively \$0.' Seufer means the cost of distributing one more item is negligible, that means distributing 10 items virtually costs similarly to distributing 1000 items.

2.4 Four basic business models where products are free

Giving products away for free is about shifting the cost of a product or service from in one or several of those dimensions: product to product, person to person, between now and the

future, or into nonmonetary markets and back out again (Anderson, 2010). There are four

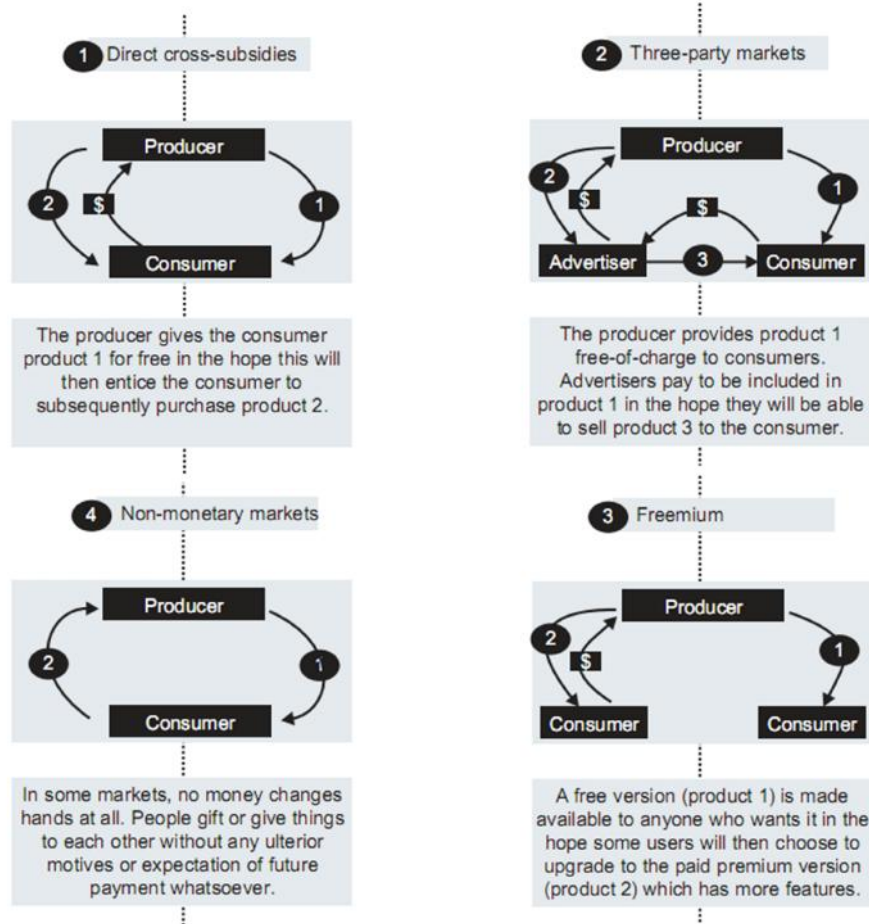


Figure 1 The four business model of free. (Anderson 2010)

main business models of free products: direct cost subsidies, three-party markets, freemium, and non-monetary market. Figure 1 above shows the 4 basic business model where products are given away for free.

2.4.1 Direct Cross-Subsidies

Figure 2 below illustrates the monetary flow in a direct cross-subsidies business model where producer gives away one product for free and gets the money from selling another product.

One example of this business model is the razor and blade story. Consumer gets the razor for free. The razor has consumable blade. Sooner or later the consumer will have to buy new blade.

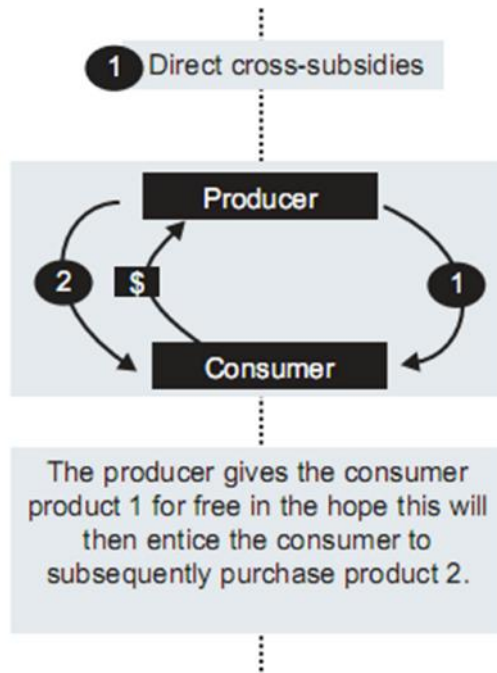


Figure 2 Direct Cross-Subsidies. (Anderson 2010)

Consumers get product 1 for free or a marginal price. Getting product 1 with no cost (financially and mentally), consumers are more inclined to buy product 2, in large bulk or recurring purchases. One classic example of this is the razor and the blade; consumers get the razor with consumable blade for a very low price, sometimes even for free, but later will have to replace the blade. The revenue from the blade covers the cost of selling razor at a discount or of giving it away for free. (Anderson 2010)

2.4.2 Three-party markets

Figure 5 shows how the Three-party markets business model works. In three-party markets producer serves 2 main type of customers: advertiser and consumer. Consumer pays little while advertiser pays more, accounting for most of the profit.

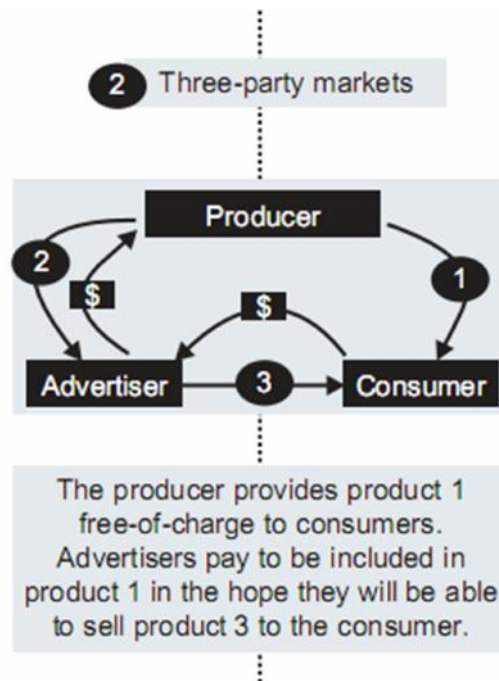


Figure 3 Three-party market. (Anderson 2010)

The producer gives away product for free to consumers. Producer gets money from advertisers who would want their ads to be included in product 1. Advertisers pay in hope of selling product 3 to consumers. This is the prevailing and most popular business model in publishing industry, including magazines, newspapers, television. And now one can even name YouTube, vloggers, producers of popular video on YouTube give their video away for free.

In turn, they gain money from advertising, or endorsement of products in advertisement.
(Anderson 2010).

2.4.3 Freemium

Figure 4 below illustrates the Freemium business model where a product is given away for free with the hope that a niche of consumers will be willing to pay for advanced features of the products.

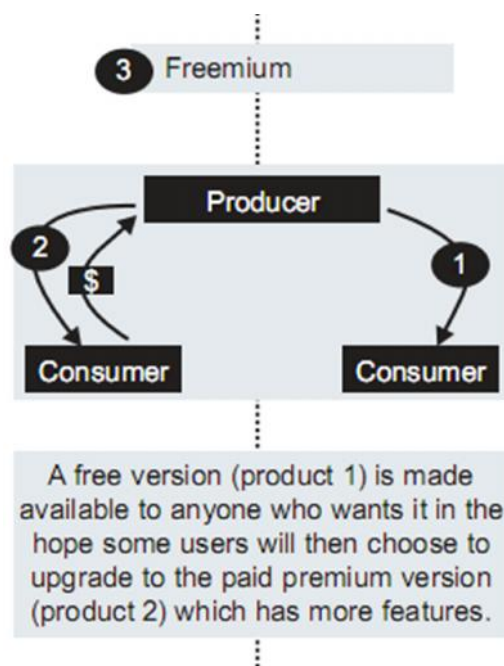


Figure 4 Freemium. (Anderson 2010)

In a freemium business model, a product is available to everyone with all of its basic functionality. By doing so, producer hopes that a certain number of users will spend money on upgrading and getting premium features of the product. Freemium is not only for digital product, for example: there are night clubs where women enter for free but men have to pay

to come in and see those beautiful creatures. The freemium business model is the focus of this thesis, to be thoroughly examined later in this thesis. (Anderson 2010)

2.4.4 Non-monetary market

Figure 5 depicts the Non-monetary market business model where products are given away for free with no hope of financial return.

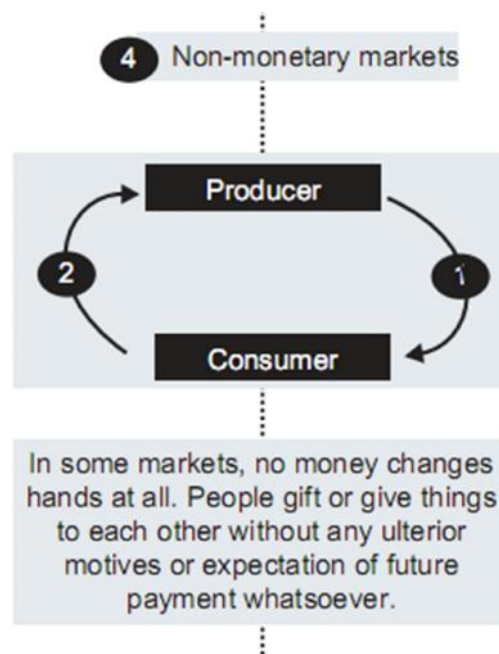


Figure 5 Non-monetary market. Anderson (2010)

In non-monetary markets, producer gives away product with little expectation of financial return. The motive of producers in non-monetary markets is often out of benevolence, goodwill, the desire to contribute, fame. One notable example is Wikipedia. People write and edit articles for Wikipedia often because they relish having their writing out there, or the process of writing and discussing on Wikipedia with other contributors. Sometimes, non-monetary markets can also boost monetary markets. For example, artists make their

music available online, video on YouTube for example, for free in order to drive sales of concert tickets or of items on other commercial platform such as iTunes. (Anderson, 2010)

2.5 A closer look at Freemium business model

This section examines the Freemium business model. The features of a viable freemium product, a model to understand players' motivation, and a model for the implementation of freemium are discussed in this section.

2.5.1 Features of a viable freemium product

Seufer (2014) maintains that freemium business model is not about giving your product away for free merely out of charity or goodwill. He suggests that freemium business model is just another approach to maximize profit, if done properly. Giving products away for free yields maximum exposure; maximum amount of players, which at the same time increases the niche of few percentage loyal fans that are likely to make repeated purchases or large purchases. The free players keep playing although do not contribute financially, they help spread the words and fuel the acquisition phase, and help getting the player base grow larger.

Seufer (2014), in more detail, points out the three fundamental realities in the freemium business models. First, at the price of zero a digital product is likely to gain maximum exposure to consumers. Second, despite gaining a large amount of user base the product gets paid from a very small percentage of them. The rule of 5% claims that only 5% of free users will spend their money on the product. The number 5% is often symbolic, conveying the conjecture that only the very few of free users will pay. The actual percentage may even be

smaller (1%, 2%) or a little bit higher. The third reality is that if the free product is made to be appealing enough, the few users who actually spend on the game will pay much more than they would have if the product was not free but paid-to-use. Therefore Seufer claims that freemium business model actually optimizes profit.

Given the 3 realities above, business that aim to create digital products in a freemium business should heed 3 things. First, producer should focus on honing the appeal of the product even if it is for free. Free is not enough, you have to make an excellent free product so that after trying people will come back to your product. Second, the product should be embedded with design that ensure a high level of engagement, - that is the number of users over a period, how frequently users use the product. When a high level of engagement is maintained, the user-base tends to grow and make the 5% rule work in one's favor. Third, to exploit the tendency of loyal users to make repeatable or large purchase, business should offer plenty of opportunity to enhance the gaming experience by paying to activating special features or getting special virtual items.

2.5.2 Bartle 4 types

The Bartle type is a model that outlines 3 major kinds of game players with different motives and desires in their gaming experience for fun. This Bartle type's model is relevant to the research because the focus here is to find out ways to make people come to our game, to stick to our game, and spend on our game. To succeed in doing so, it is necessary to have a firm grasp on players 'motives and desires. Once knowing that, it is easier to feed them what they want and induce them to pay for our game. So the first step in trying to make money from the game is to learn about and understand the motives and desires of players, what they want out of a gaming experience (Bartle 1996).

The four types of players can be depicted in the following abstract graph

Figure 5 depicts the four types of players as categorized by Bartle (1996) based on 2 criteria: whether the players focus on other players or the world, and whether the players focus on interacting or acting.

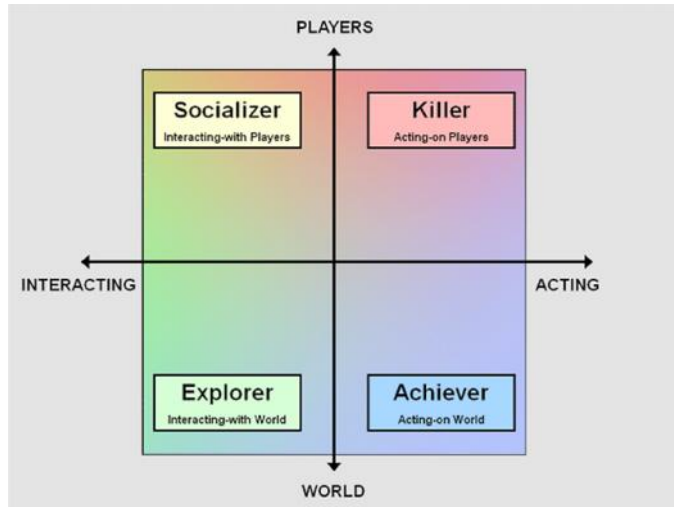


Figure 6 Bartle 4 type. (Bartle 1996)

Achievers want to act on the world. They play games mostly because they enjoy the process of mastering the game, enhancing their level control within the game. Also achievers take pride from their status in the game level hierarchy; - position in the leaderboard of a game is one particular example. In a conventional pack of cards, they can be considered as Diamonds, always seeking treasure (Bartle 1996).

Explorers want to interact with the world. They play games mostly because they enjoy discovering the virtual world. They take pride from learning about the intricacy of the game, the finer points of the game that few players know about. For example, in shooting game explorers are likely to be interested in finding a spot where it is difficult to be discovered by

enemies. In a conventional pack of cards, they can be considered as Spades, always digging for more information, for new things (Bartle 1996).

Socializers want to interact with other players. They play games mostly because they want to find out about and get to know new people. The game is just a platform for them to advance that end. Socializers take pride from the friendships they forge and the influence they have on others. In a conventional pack of cards, they can be considered as Heart, often making effort to empathize with other players (Bartle 1996).

Killers enjoy acting on other players. They play games mostly because they want to display their superiority over other players. The game is a setting where they can perform violent actions on others, actions that may lead to prison in the real world. Killers take pride from their reputation and their ability to beat other players down. In a conventional pack of cards, they can be considered as Clubs, using clubs to hit other players (Bartle 1996).

2.5.3 ARM funnel

ARM (stands for Acquisition, Retention, and Monetization) is a model refined by Kontagent Research Group. The model provides a 3 stages process, aiming at gaining money from social games. ARM model is relevant to the research because the game of the research can be considered as a social game. Social games are games played on social platforms. Social platforms include Facebook, mobile devices platform such as iOS, Android. The game of this research is a free game available on Facebook and Google Play market for Android device.

It qualifies as a social game. Therefore understanding ARM is crucial in finding ways to make money from this social game of the company.

Figure 7 below illustrates the ARM funnel and its 3 major phases.

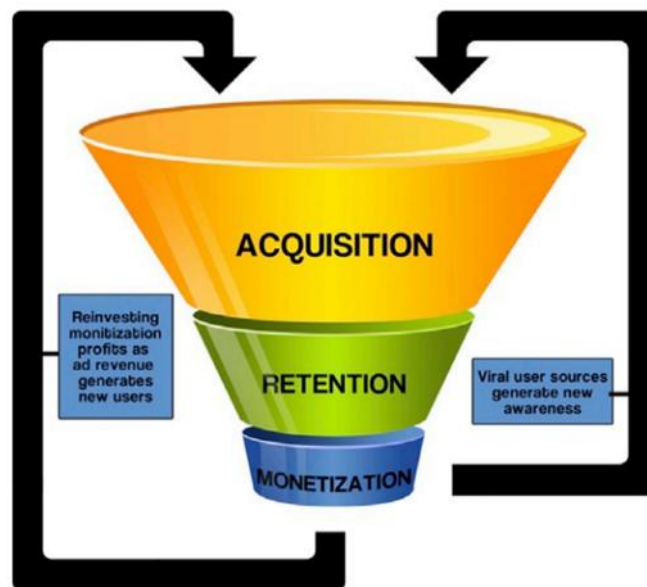


Figure 7 ARM funnel. Fields & Cotton (2010)

Acquisition, Retention, and Monetization are the most 3 important stages in offering a free-to-play game with the intent of maximize profit. The 3 stages are not strictly linear; they are more akin to a recurring cycle. First, you acquire a large player base. Then you retain those players; keep enough of them coming back so that some of them will actually like your game enough to invest their money into it. Some of the players you retain will spread words and make your game viral. They will raise the brand awareness of your game and attract some more players. The profit you gain from monetization can be invested again into acquiring more players to make the amount of players even bigger. The cycle repeats. (Fields & Cotton, 2012, 126)

Acquisition

Liebowitz(2002)'s theory of Network Effects states that the larger the base of consumers, the higher is its usefulness. Sundarajan (2014) 'more usage of the product by any user increases the product's value for other users, and sometimes all users'. When consumers value a product in high regards, they are more likely to spend their money on it. Therefore, acquiring a large base of consumers is the first crucial step in making money from a free product.

Once a game has acquired a substantial fan base, it can partly rely on word-of-mouth via social network in acquiring more players. Another way to raise awareness and interest in trying the game is to advertise your game. Advertisements could be placed on Facebook, Google search engine, paid accordingly to how many times ads are seen, how many times ads are clicked, or how many people actually click and install the game. A business can also raise awareness and interest in its social game by getting social media channels to cover the game. A game can be reviewed by review sites, or by YouTube review channels. Stories can also be written about stories behind the game, stories of the business if framed in an interesting angle. Another effective method in acquiring players is cross-marketing. One example of cross-marketing is to redirect players between games of the same company. This way, all games of a company get higher chance of exposure. Another effective way is to incentivize people to invite their friends to try the game; for every person whom you invite that installs the game, you will be rewarded by some gifts in the game. (Askelöf, 2013, 42).

Retention

Retention is about stickiness; - making players stick to the game, keep coming back to the game. To do that, a game needs to have triggers that induce players to come back. To create

effective triggers, it is important to have a firm grasp on why players play game. This is where the Bartle model of 4 types of players is useful. For players that are dominantly competitive, one can create competitive triggers that keep them on their toe. Using leaderboard is one way to appeal to players 'competitive desire, they see their results and don't want to be left behind in the leaderboard. Leaderboard is a very effective tool in that it appeals to both killers and achievers types which are aplenty in most games. (Luton, 2013).

In a more systematic and comprehensive manner, Askelöf(2013) mentions 4 major facets in designing social games that retain players: progress systems, social aspects, feedback, time-based limitations. Progress systems involve tracking and recording the achievement of the players in the game. Achievements can be in term of level unlocked, points gained, or amount of wins in competition with other players. Social aspects entail social interaction, cooperation to compete in the games, - activities that conduce bonding between players, creating a sense of community and camaraderie. Time-based limitations are designed to limit the amount of gaming sessions, creating frustration that can be released by purchasing items that enable players to play without those limitations.

Monetization

There are many way to make money from a free social mobile game. The two most notable ways are selling advertisement and selling virtual items. In freemium business model, selling virtual items is the primary source of revenue. Virtual items can be offered either to relieve the frustration of the limits impinged on players (limited energy, limited gaming session, having to wait) or to enhance the gaming experience (vanity items, items that make players a bit stronger or better-looking) (Luton 2013). Fields *et al* (2012) note that it is important to

adapt monetization system to the genre of the game. The nature of the game decides which kind of items is suitable for purchase.

Tuovinen (2013) points out that the success of selling virtual items is the result of at least two factors. The first factor is prerequisite: The game itself has to be good first in order to induce time-commitment of the players. The more time a player spends on a game, the more likely that player is to purchase virtual items. The second factor is of a supporting role. It is the pressure from social environment, most effectively in the form of recommendations or seeing attractive items on other players.

3 IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH

3.1 Research method

This thesis uses qualitative research method because of this method is more suitable to the research topic. The reason for that is threefold. First, the development of Free-to-Play game business is still in its nascent stage, making qualitative research an appropriate approach as pointed out by Kananen (2011, 41). Second, the topic of this thesis requires analysis mostly of factors that are difficult to measure and more of opinionated nature. Therefore, qualitative research method, which seeks to explore the question of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’, is useful (Kananen 2011, 35). Third, this thesis is a commercial research paper. In other words, it is tailored to the wish of the commissioner. The company wants suggestions for the improvement their Free-to-Play game to make it more monetizable. Best practices in the industry are expected to be examined; their applicability to the game is assessed. Opinions from experts and players on the specific case of the game is collected and reported. The purpose of the thesis makes qualitative research, which utilizes focused and small samples, a sensible choice. (Kananen 2011, 37)

3.2 Implementation Plan

A conventional qualitative research has 3 stages: 1) planning, 2) data collection, 3) analysis and interpretation (Kananen 2011, 36). In the stage of planning, the major focus of the research is defined, and the related areas of knowledge (background knowledge, theoretical frameworks) delineated (to be discussed later in Chapter 3). The major focus of this research

is on how to help the game more capable of inducing spending from players. The research is therefore directed to explore, collect, and compile an improvement proposal for the game.

Data collection in this thesis was conducted qualitatively in 2 ways. First, empirical observation of the author through playing the game was recorded in written form. Second, two interviews were conducted, one with a game professional, - co-creator of a classic FPS game, the other with a player and also game tester of the game who has spent considerable time playing and evaluating the game for the company from the perspective of a player.

The author employed semi-structure interview because this approach enables the researcher to prise information out of interviewee by asking them open-ended questions and letting them speak freely without interruption (Flick, 1998) In the stage of analysis and interpretation, the author then wrote an analysis of the game with reference to criteria from selected theoretical frameworks. The 2 interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted to help inform the content of the proposal.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Interview with a game professional

The game professional is a notorious game producer who made a classic PC shooting game that the game of the research bears much resemblance to. The only difference is that the game of this research is played mainly on mobile platform, not for PC hardcore players. In the interview, the game professional admitted one caveat that he is not very fond of the freemium business model. The game professional has a more aesthetic orientation in game development; he doesn't like having to care too much about designing the game in order to monetize it later. He said that tends to complicate matter, and so he prefers just making a good game and then sell it. That being said, the game professional also has worked with the freemium business model for a considerable amount of time. He worked on another game of the same genre for 7 years, in a freeium business model.

According to what he said to have been implemented in that game, that game was monetized mainly through selling virtual items inside the game. Those items included cosmetic items, skins for characters, add-on for guns (silencers, flashlights, sniper scopes). Those items were sold either for a period of times or purchased permanently. When asked what he thought was the important thing to keep players coming back in an online multiplayer shooting game, the game professional gave a twofold answer. First, he said that a community, a large base of players is of great importance. It conduces the interaction between players, bonding, socializing. That's what keeps players coming back to the game even when the game becomes old. Second, a game can also retain its players by constantly refreshing itself. A game can be refreshed through regular updates of new features, new levels, and new add-ons.

When asked of his opinion on the game of the company, the game professional said that the game had a good chance of becoming a dominant shooting game on mobile devices. And at the same time he also voiced some reservations in areas that the game has much scope for improvements. The game has great potential to become more dominant because there have not been many shooting games for mobile devices with such features and such a large players base as the game of the company. The game professional stressed the importance of keeping in mind that we are dealing with mobile game here. The nature of mobile game, he claimed, is that it pulls in casual players who don't play for long period but rather in fragmented and scattered short sessions. For example, a player may play the shooting game for 10-15 minutes when he has to wait for a bus, or for someone in an appointment.

Mobile game is mostly for casual players; therefore he thought everything in a mobile game should be simplified. The core mechanic of the targeted game here is simply to run around and shoot. The company should make the loop of 'run - shoot - die - run' as quick as possible. He suggested doing so through simplifying everything: game control, game environment - the map, actions, game mode. The map should be smaller so that it doesn't take long for players to bump into each others and shoot. The game mode should be simplified even more; the game professional suggested focusing on two to three popular features and making them really good.

On monetization, the game professional suggested learning from already successful online shooting game such as CrossFire. He also stressed the importance of using data analytics in experimenting and finding out what the players like. The kind of virtual items to be sold in the game includes cosmetic items, different guns, and add-ons. He also noted the im-

portance of not adding too powerful gun to be purchased. It's important to keep the game balance, and not a pay to win game.

4.2 Interview with a game player

The game player being interviewed for this research has more than 15 years gaming experience both as a hardcore and casual player. He also worked for half a year at the game company as a game tester. After engaging in conversation about his gaming experience in his childhood and today, the player revealed his main motives in playing shooting game. There are 2 main motives. First, he played game as a way to bond with his friends, as he used to play multiplayer shooting game with his friends in the same room. Second, he enjoys the competitive side of shooting games, particularly the tactical and strategy aspect of the game. So it can be said that the player here is a socializer and an achiever at the same time, seeking friendship and control over the game at the same time.

The player thought the game of the company in general is a decent shooting game in a market of not so many up to par shooting games. He enjoyed playing the game because there are enough skilled players thanks to the large base of players. The player expressed several reservations about the game. First he thought the recently implemented advertisements system in the game is very intrusive, giving away a very bad impression on players. He thought the company should do away with the pop-up and banner in the game if it wanted to retain players. Second, he was also particularly not fond of the limited access to gun in the game, which really limited the experience of new players. If they could not fully enjoy the game, then they would not be likely to come back to the game. Thirdly, the graphic of the game was not really that excellent in comparison to other mobile games. He thought there was a

great scope for improvement, although the graphic of the game isn't that lagging behind but clearly not in the lead.

On monetization, the player said that he would be willing to spend on cosmetic items that make he looks cool and stand out from other players. Those items spans from new gun models, new character models, to customized animation (running, ducking, dying). Also he would love to see more social function integrated in the game. Specifically he talked about the texting message between players outside matches, which could help building friendship between players, keeping them coming back to the game.

5 IMPROVEMENT PROPOSAL

5.1 Assessment of the game

Qualitative research of the game yields five main observations. First, CSP is a blend of existing popular FPS games. The game appears to have the design of the classic Counter-Strike, game modes of some thing. Secondly, the game has cross-platform multiplayer function. That means it is possible for players from different platforms, with different type of devices to compete with each other. For example, a player who uses PC can play on Facebook against a player on a Samsung Galaxy Smartphone. This may in a way be a competitive edge of the game. CSP are the only FPS for mobile devices to have multiplayer cross-platform. However it can also be said that this cross-platform multiplayer feature signifies lack of focus, and that the game should be restricted only to mobile devices.

Thirdly, CSP has a variety of game mode for multiplayer (7 different game modes), which again can be a double-sword. Diversity at first is ostensibly a positive thing. However, in this case it may actually induce lack of focus in refining the game play. In fact, there may only be 2-3 game modes which are most-played by players. To focus on refining those modes would prove more beneficial. Fourthly, CSP has an amazing variety of maps, ranging from maps that evoke that nostalgia of the old Counter Strike to those reminiscent of Nintendo 64 era. Many of these maps are made by the fans in the community. The drawback is that many of those are not up to standard, not fit for mobile game. For example: mobile shooting game should be quick to run around and shoot, a too big map would prolong the time unnecessarily.

The final observation is about the weaponry system. CSP actually went a step backward when it shifted from a system of free guns to a system of unlocking guns by watching ads.

This system has evoked annoyance amongst a great number of players who continuously voiced their dissent via email or on review section on Google Play store. The game had come from a Free-to-Play game with a Direct Cost Subsidies model to one with Three-party Market model.

5.2 Moving toward a Freemium Business Model

In the first place, the game was purely a free game in a non-monetary market. The game was given away to players for free without hope of getting any money back. That helped a lot in gaining the game a relatively large player base. However, the company later attempt to get money from the game was not really successful, and could be deemed as unwise. The company implemented a system of pop-up ads and banners that were really intrusive and annoying to players. That lost the company a considerable amount of players, for only a modest amount of revenue from ads. That decision could be seen as a backward move of the company, from a game with great potential to succeed in freemium business model to a mediocre game in a three-party market model.

According to the interview with the game player, a sensible suggestion now would be that the company radically changes the game back to its initial stage if not making it better. That means dropping all the absurd ads, dropping all the limited access to guns choices. The second step would be to improve the game with an orientation toward freemium business model. It means giving all the players great gaming experience with the free version and offering virtual items and features to enhance the experience of a very few percentage of players. The key here is to focus on enhance the experience of players, not to build up frustration.

5.3 Simplify the game design

As mentioned by the game professional in the interview, the nature of mobile gaming is casual, simple, and addictive. The company should improve their game around this principle. As the game professional suggested, a sensible course of action would be to simplify the game, focusing on its core game mechanic: players run around and shoot each others. Everything in the game should be designed to facilitate that process of running around and shooting each others. The game in other words should be simplified and streamlined so that the playing loop of ‘run-shoot-die-reborn’ happens and repeats quickly. The company can do that in several aspects of the game: game control, game map, and game mode.

The game control on the touchpad should be simplified. As the game professional suggested, it makes sense to reduce the numbers of control on the touchscreen, do away with unnecessary functions such as ducking, jumping. The touchscreen control should only be centered on running around and aiming one’s gun. Everything else that does not pertain to that should be considered redundant.

The game map is another factor that substantially influences the playing loop. The game map, the environment in which players run around and shoot should be designed in a way that it does not take too long for players to bump into each other and fight. In other words, the game maps should not be complex. Maps should be simple and small, although some nuance in design is not necessary forbidden.

The game mode is another aspect that the game professional thinks could be streamlined in the game. At the moment, the game has about 7 game modes but only 2-3 of them were really played and enjoyed by players. It is recommendable to drop all the unpopular game

modes and focus on a few 2 or 3 game modes. The company should invest its time, money, and energy into improving that 2 or 3 popular game modes, which could pay off in players' engagement.

5.4 Some notes on retention

As mentioned in the previous section, simplifying the game to create quickly repeating playing loop is the first step in making the game addictive, thereby better retaining players. The next step is to design a system of triggers that induce players to come back to the game. One powerful approach is to use the leaderboard approach. The game could integrate weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly leaderboard. The ranking should be calculated by the difference between number of kills and number of deaths within a given period, not cumulative. That way, even new players can be on the leaderboard after playing for only a few days. That would motivate new players to come back to the game by giving them a sense of possibility that although they are newcomers they could still get some kind of recognition. Another way to retain players is to nudge them to come back to the game by sending some message to players when they haven't played the game for 2 weeks for example. The message should say something like this: "Dear XYZ, you haven't been active for 2 weeks. You would now want to come back and play because we have this thing A and B new".

Another way is to incentivize appointment. For example, if a player plays all 7 days of a week, each day playing at least 15 minutes, that players will be rewarded by a cosmetic product or a unique-looking gun available for 2 weeks. This way, players will be motivated to play everyday to get rewards. And later, those unique items can be sold in game for some price also, so that those who miss some days can pay to get the prize. Leaderboard, status,

and hierarchy are also an effective tool to satisfy players and keep them coming back. The company should focus on defining a clear system of hierarchy for players who have reached a certain amount of kills and deaths, to recognize their status. The other players will look at that, grow jealous, and be motivated to play more to get there.

5.5 Some notes on monetization

In essence, monetization for mobile game is not a new topic. Successful practices can be found in books and internet everywhere. The main issue here is to pick what works for this particular game. The game of the company is virtually the only one of its kind in the mobile game market at the moment. There have been no multiplayer shooting games for mobile games like this game so far. Therefore it may be a challenging task to find and benchmark successful practices of similar games. There is however one successful online shooting game with a robust monetization system. That game is CrossFire. The problem is that Crossfire is a PC game, in a way it is for hardcore players. Nevertheless the company can learn several things about what to sell in its game.

Cosmetic items are one kind that should be implemented in the game. They can be new skins for the character, add-ons for guns, nice costumes, and many other accessories, things that make players look cool and stand out from others. Items that bring a slight edge of advantage to players for a period of time would also be plausible. For example, besides the regular range of gun choices, players can purchase some special guns which are a little bit more powerful and far-reaching than other guns. Another way to implement monetization is to randomly give away special items on special occasions (Christmas, New Year, mid-

summer, Valentines Day), and then sell those items for some price. Players would love to possess something unique and are willing to pay a reasonable price for that.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to explore the topic of monetization in mobile games, and in the process give practical suggestions to improve the game of the company that commissioned the research. The theoretical context section gave a brief overview of the concept of free in business through history; showing why giving products away for free is an inexorable trend in our digital age. The 4 main business models of free are illustrated with the focus on the freemium business model as it is the most suitable model for the game of this research. In closer look at freemium business model, the thesis surveyed several important models in game industry to gain a firm grasp on players' motivations and way of generating revenue.

Interviews with a game professional and a game player reveal several key issues with the game. The game has potential to become a more dominant and financially successful mobile game. However, to attain that the company still has a lot of work to do in term of game design and monetization design. In the improvement proposal, the thesis puts forward suggestions in game design and monetization design, with the main focus on simplifying the game and making it more enjoyable for players, learning the best practices from games of the same genre.

The qualitative research of this thesis might be criticized for its limited number of subjects. That criticism is not unfounded. However, one should also keep in mind that this thesis did not set out in the first place to prove anything. Therefore to criticize this thesis on the ground of reliability is not productive and not relevant. This thesis in the first place aimed to explore the problem and give practical and sound suggestions to the company. And the nature of suggestion is that it may or may not work. Therefore, there is also great possibility for future research based on this thesis, to test the suggestions put forward in this research.

The mobile game and social game design industry is an expanding field with many frontiers to be pushed. It is open to creativity, experiment, and exploration. That is the spirit this thesis was carried out with. Hopefully this thesis will also help ignite that spirit in other fellow researchers, practitioners in the field of mobile game design.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Interview Transcript with the game professional. (G- the researcher, M-the game professional)

G: So I remember you spoke in your keynote speech that you are not really in favour of the freemium business model. aren't you

M: Yeah, from a game developer's standpoint, it really complicates the process of designing the game around freemium.

[got a bit of confusion here between 'freemium' and 'free-to-play'].].

G: So what is 'freemium' to you?

M: It's when you give it away for free and sell in-app purchases.

G: Have you got experienced with that?

M: Yeah, the last game we were working on. We gave it away and selling various things, like skins, various little items that players can buy.

G: you are talking about tactical intervention?

M: yes.

G: In which market did you implement that?

M: it was predominantly targeted to the Western market which would be North America and Western Europe. Because it was released on Steam and the majority of steam players are from those regions.

G: And so what kind of items do you sell?

M: we were selling cosmetic items. So you can buy skins for your character and skins for your weapons. Also we sold stuffs like add-on for the guns, so you can buy, like, silencer, or flashlight and also you can buy a sniper scope for your gun.

G: Some that was some kind of repeatable purchases? I mean is it available for a period of time or forever?

M: well there are various options, you can actually pay like a small price to buy it for a period of time or you can pay more to purchase it on a permanent basis. So we give people the option to do both. Depending on how much they want to spend.

G: Alright and how did it turn out? in term of percentage for example

M: I think it was about 2 percent or maybe...I don't exactly have the number but it is definitely below 5%. I don't think it was above 5. maybe 4 or 3 percent. Generally it wasn't enough for us to sustain the game.

G: the items you sold it didn't bring any kind of advantage to the player. Only cosmetic?

M: Well we did sell some kind of items. We sell many kind of items. Some of them were purely cosmetic; there were some items that did have a small, like a slight benefit to the player. For example: the add-on for the gun, you can buy the silencer, that kind of thing.

G: Can you tell me a bit about the motivation of the player in First Person Shooting game, what have you learnt about the motivation of the player? What keep them coming back to the game, as a player, as a game developer?

M: I think from my experience, just basically, I think the fact that the game had a large community. If it doesn't have enough players, people don't come back. IT is really a difficult situation because there are so many FPS games out there. It's very hard to build a large player base. So it's kind of, I guess the most important thing is just to really release a lot of

new content on recurring basis. Like most of Free-to-play game they release new level or new items, new add-on, to sell every month or so. This is really important it keeps the game fresh. Not having is very problematic because your players get bored. It's kind of weird, it's not like. For example, like CS - Counter Strike, it's kind of like. The game hasn't even changed for 10 years and yet people still play it. And it has nothing to do with new content and they play that game because the community is so huge that it's always kind of. Every time you join a game you are getting a new experience because you play with different players. just because of the size of the community.

G: so just to digress a bit. Do they make money from Counter Strike right now? I mean how do they make money, do they sell item?

M: Well now, they don't make money any more because when you buy a game, there is no way to monetize it.

G: come back to CSP? What do you think about the game? Do you think it has the appeal necessary for a successful freemium game? I mean on mobile platform, I'm not talking about PC.

M: Yeah, I think right now the mobile devices there is no huge FPS multiplayer game at the moment on mobile devices. CSP is like the number 1 game. So there is good chance for CSP to establish itself as a popular multiplayer, competitive FPS game on the mobile. So that's kind of what we try to achieve. But I mean, the formula for the game is not any different from the games that I worked on before. It's multiplayer FPS game. The game mechanics are pretty much the same: you run around, you shoot, plant the bomb. But the thing we tried to make as well as we can is the control games. You have to really take advantage of the limited control of the mobile so you should try to design your game around that. I think FPS are the worst for mobile, because there are so many control for FPS so you have to re-

ally make something changes in the way FPS control. For example the jumping and the ducking, on a mobile it's not the most useful things to do. So we might consider removing that ability.

G: So you think we should simplify..

M: yeah, exactly, simplify. Because that's really what mobile games are. They are really just simplified version of the PC games.

G: ..like casual gamers.

M: exactly, if you look at the most popular mobile game they are extremely simple. They don't have like too many control. The controls aren't convoluted.

G: so, does that make it any different from many PC games in attracting and retaining players. Do players come to FPS on mobile games for different motivations than players on PC.

M: yeah I think so, I think in general, most of the players that play on the mobile are extremely casual players. They don't play for extended period of time. For example: on PC FPS players, in general they play for more than an hour or even longer. So on average, they play longer on a PC, but on a mobile I got the feeling that they are just more casual players, they play for 15 minutes. I think that's the kind of general mentality with mobile game. You just play it in your spare time. Like if I am at home and I have access to my PC. I'm not gonna play my mobile games. It's terrible. You only play it when you are outside, waiting for something. So in that sense, we try to make sure when we design a mobile game, we try to make sure that they can play it really quickly and they don't take too long. So in general the maps are smaller.

G: that's an important point that you raise there. So you say the maps should be small and not too big.

M: not too complicated. just simple.

G: The game has 7 or 8 modes, like zombies, juggernaut, ..

M: I'd like to simplify that a bit because I think the previous version was just a bit too disorganized. It wasn't focused.

G: So how many game modes would you like to see. What kind of game modes would you like to see?

M: I'd like to just focus on the most standard one like bomb mode, the death match mode. Those are the 2 most popular game modes. So I just want to make sure that we get those mode done properly before we start looking at other modes.

G: So it's bomb mode and death match. definitely one of my favorite. Well I think that may be it for today. Is there anything else I should know about monetizing this game with CSP?

M: so at the moment CSP has no monetization at all. just ad. that's why we try to fix, making a system where we can sell things. we'll generate revenue, but yeah we'd be careful not to make the game become 'pay-to-win'. That's always a problem. So we are going to be selling cosmetic stuffs and also we'll be selling small upgrades to the players that improve performance.

G: so what kind of effect does that make to the other paid versions? There are 2 paid versions, CM: SWAT, and CM: SPACE.

M: oh yeah, so we are going to do away with that shit. we are going to have only 1 version. Having 2 versions, I think that was kind of a mistake. we are not gonna do that.

G: so CSP is the way now?

M: yeah, we just focus on one product and one name. i think critical missions was a mistake.

G: if you may, what are the main directions we are trying to build a system to monetize the game better, creating an in-app store, design items? what are we doing, what can we do?

M: pretty much all of that, we have to make the store, we have to create in-app item to purchase. we can't just make one and not the other. the store and the, and just basically the customization of items,

G: so is there anything you want to know more in designing an in-app store, items. What do you want to know from players ?

M: that's where we use app analytics to find out what people want. There is so many games that have done this so we can learn. So we just copy what they do on a mobile platform. In that sense, it's not much different.

G: so game analytics is a major part in your monetization strategy. But that's gonna take sometimes.

M: once you have the store in place, we can monitor that.

Interview with the player-game tester (G- the researcher, T- the game tester/player)

G- Good afternoon. Thank you for being here. Could you please tell me a bit about your experience in gaming?

T- I started gaming since I was very little. When I was a kid in Vietnam, there were those PC LAN cafes everywhere. I'm sure you've seen them as well. There was basically everywhere. So everyday after school I would just come to the nearest cafe LAN, I would stay for at least half an hour watching everyone else playing video game. All sort of different games. Back then we had a lot of games, popular, like Counter Strike, StarCraft, and Age of Empires, Diablo.

G- So has your gaming habit changed along the way as you grew up?

T- oh definitely, I used to be pretty hard core game when I was in junior high school and high school. but ever since starting college I haven't been playing games that much. If at all. Mostly nowadays I just play a few flash games online, if they are recommended by friends. Or I just play a few soccer matches on the computer with my friends who come over sometimes.

G- You said that you used to be a hardcore gamer. What were the games you used to be a hardcore player in?

T- They were mostly first person shooter games. The first obvious one is Counter Strike. I think that's one game everyone has played at least once in their lives. I think I started playing when I was in third grade. There was a period of like 7th to 9th grade where I basically spent half of my day everyday playing it. So it was a big part of my childhood. And another

game in the similar vein was Halo 2. It was like a very popular shooter game in the United States. When I was there in junior high school, so from 7th to 9th grade as well. And it was a different game but it was also the same experience as Counter Strike.

G- and what did you enjoy most playing those games? Halo for example.

T- I think the most enjoyable thing about FPS is the fact that you are being with your friends, the fact that you are playing a very competitive game. And every little thing you do can result in a victory or defeat. And you know when you play in person with your friends; you are trash talking each other after you get killed. and taunting each others, yelling at your teammates to get out of the way of the grenade. that's the most fun I've had in my childhood.

G- yeah, right, so are there any other aspects of the game that you enjoyed?

T- aside from the gaming experience itself, I would say that playing game is a very good social bonding tool between me and my friends. for boys, and it was just when you were young you don't have to worry about anything. and you just immersed yourself in the game.

G- what about the tactical aspects of the game?

T- oh yeah, that's also one of the reason why I enjoy playing shooter game so much. Even though I barely ever scratch the surface of the competitive aspect of gaming. I still recognize like what to do in what situation. so it's kind of like a chess game, a real time chess game in a sort of way for me. So that's why I enjoyed it so much.

G- tell me a bit about your experience with Critical Strike Portable.

T- I actually have a lot of experience with the Critical Strike series. Having been an intern at critical force entertainment for over half a year, and I stopped playing the game for quite a while after I left my post. But recently I was given the opportunity to try the latest version of the game. it has been changed a lot since the last time I played it.

G- what is your overall impression of the game?

T- well, like I said, the thing I like the most about playing shooter games is the social bonding and the competitive experience it brings. Even though CSP doesn't deliver on the social aspect because it's an online game. I think it's a very good game as far as mobile shooter games go, in term of tactics.

G- would you say that it is more casual?

T- of course, it is, because the nature of mobile game is casual. but i think CSP has done a very good job with the limitation of the format.

G- have you played other shooting games on mobile devices? and what are they?

T- I think I have only played a couple of games. as part of my intern task. I can't say I remember what they were. I think one of the games was call of duty spin off, and the other is also a ww2 shooter type of game. there were also several zombies' shooter games that i played. but I am not a huge fan of that genre very much. it places more emphasis on the killing rather than the strategy or the tactic.

G- how would you compare CSP with those games?

T- Due to my lack of experience with the other games, I can't say I am at the liberty to give a meaningful evaluation. but I will say that CSP is much better game for me than the other alternatives.

G- about what you like about CSP? other things, game play, gun, anything/

T- There are a lot of small things that I enjoy about the game. But I'd say my biggest impression is the competitive aspect of the game. Because of the large player base, which ensures that there are skilled players enough playing the game. My observation, experience with the game matches the abovementioned assumption. I've met a lot of skilled players in this game I really enjoyed the challenge.

G- You enjoyed killing off those guy

T - yeah it's more like battle of the brain you know. that also relies on quick fingers, sleight of hand

G-. so do you care very much about your ranking in the game, I mean the ratio of kill and death

T- even though there are many good players in the game and I enjoy playing it competitively a little bit. The casual nature of mobile gaming, I think that's why people mostly don't take it serious, the ranking. I'm sure it's fun for some people to achieve to get their names on the leaderboard. but to me, I don't really care too much about having my name on top on the board.

G- Now the bad things, what do you not like about the game?

T- like I. said before, I was recently given the opportunity to test up the new version of the game. And it seems to me that they implemented this ads system where every time you clicked on an item in the menu, you get a pop up ad that covers the entire screen. And you have to close it every single time. And I think that is a very intrusive system that overall doesn't appeal to players, to get them to purchase the paid version of the game. I think that's one of the important things, to give the good impression in the mind of the new players. so you can convert them into long-term customers.

G- so you are saying that the game at its current state is giving away a bad impression upon you. And you wouldn't want to purchase the premium version.

T- yeah a bad initial impression. and I would seriously consider the decision because you know.

G- so the bad thing is the banner or the pop-up ad.

T- yeah I don't like the way it is implemented.

G- is there anything else you don't like about the game?

T- this one has more to do with gameplay itself. But it is intertwined between the game play aspect and the more business aspect but the decision to limit one type of gun a day for a free player; I think it hurts the game a lot. As you know the weapon action in the game is really subpar. It has in total about 5 weapons including the knife. And about 2 of those are viable for a serious game. The assault rifle and the sniper rifle. And if so the is not very limited and if you are restricted to one gun a day that would really impact your chance to experience and enjoy the game. You know if I am a new player I open up and download the game. And i

see a bunch of ad greeting me every time I click a menu item. I go and play the game, and then I can only choose a single gun without understand what each gun does and I can only use it for the entirety of that day. That would leave a quite poor taste on the player.

G- so the main thing is about the pop-up banner and the way they limited to access to the guns. IN the game they have 7 game modes; do you remember what they are? That's not easy but what are you favorite game modes in CSP?

T-let me see, I remember that there are a few objective-base mode, like rescue hostage and defusing bombs. There were also a couple of novelty mode like; I think it was zombies match and juggernaut. I was never a fan of those novelty modes very much. But I think the one that stands out most to me is the death match mode. Because it's obvious the most fun. When you play on the mobile you'd be under time-constraint. And you want to have the most enjoyable experience during your playing time. And I think death match works is that every time you die, you instantly come back to life after a few seconds. So i think that game mode allows for the most action And therefore the most entertaining, out of all the modes.

G- what is your favorite weapon in the game?

T_ well, it really depends. There are that many options to choose from. But usually I pick the weapon based on the map. if it a small map with a lot of corridor to surprise people, I'd simply pick 1 out of those 2 assault rifle. if it's a long map with road that extent from one side to another, then I'd pick a sniper rifle and sit on one end and zoom to the other end waiting for someone to come up. But I also enjoy the more diverse map, or example there are a lot of knife only map, I think those are pretty fun depending on the map. depending

on the host, because you can choose the terrain to your advantage. It's a very different experience from using gun.

G- so what is your favorite fighting style, your strategy?

T-. this one also depends on the map and the gun. If I pick the sniper rifle, usually going for a more camping style, hide myself behind boxes. But if I pick an assault rifle, I'd roam everywhere, finding people head on shooting them in the balls. But sometimes I just take a knife in a gun map and I just tried to kill as many people as I can with it.

or I just use the snipe rifle without scope [fuck wait, is it possible?] and then I run everywhere and try to get close to people, it did not work out very well

G- Let's talk about premium feature, what are the features you would like to see in the game for free?

T- I would have to say that. social integration. yes, like when I was speaking earlier about how my early FPS experience as bonding tool. The internet is not the best medium to make friends, or to enjoy an experience with stranger. I would still like to see the social aspect of the game implemented. So like they can have some texting feature between the players.

G- how do you mean? chat during the game

T- outside the match. In game is difficult to type and fight at the same time. I believe the game already has the friendship system, it's not at all developed, I mean you just add someone to the list and that's it. nothing happen.

G- anything else you would like to see added to the game?

T- I hope the development team will put a lot more focus on the cosmetic aspect of the game. I have a lot of experience with this game; I know that a player will want to customize his or her character so that he can stand out from other people. And if you put some effort into making some custom cosmetic for certain models. For example: gun models, character model, and custom animation. I believe it would be very appreciated by the fan base.

G- so tell me a bit more that cosmetic thing. What kind of stuff you your self would personally like to have?

T_ I would just like something that looks cool on my character. Maybe some goggles, swimming glasses, different version of that, anything that spices up the game.

I think there are certain cosmetic that if done tastefully can really impact the way players view the game, and customized animation are also very cool. For example: you can have different running animation, ducking animation, shooting animation, and dying animation.

G-. but will the players be able to see it? For example if you say ducking animation. Then how will the players see it himself because he could only see his 2 hands in the first person view?

T- maybe it'd be visible to other players.

G- oh and I think the player can have also 3rd person game

T- yeah so it may make sense like that. Oh and you can have knife animation, stab, slash. then may if you create new animation for player who get kill by knife. It can be interesting.

G- so what kind of features would you be willing to pay for?

T- as long as it is reasonably price, and i enjoyed it and buying it would make my game more fun I'd definitely get it.

G- more specific what kind of item or feature?

T- I don't know if I'd call it feature. I'd suggest that, more gun be added to the game, because the current gun selection is very uninspired, very limited, - in term of the number of choices and in design. I would welcome new guns that have impact on the game play and does not shake the balance of power between different guns.

G- Is there anything else as a player you would want to suggest to the game development team?

T- I believe I have already listed some of my concern. If i could add my last one, it would be to improve the quality of the model in the game, the graphic of the model. Both the character model and the map, environment, the texture. I believe that despite my limited experience with other shooter game on mobile. I think they all have the advantage of having good graphic, but pretty detail for mobile games. I don't think the graphic of CSP is up to par. Not like it's way behind, but I'm just saying that when it comes to graphic, other games have a lead on CSP. you know it is not really to the developers' concern of the game. but it would be nice if they can bump up the graphic.